

**THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO**

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6. The method of Claim 1, wherein electronically notifying comprises sending to the first user an email message which contains the contact information and a description of the product.

7. The method of Claim 1, further comprising generating a data structure which maps items to users that purchased the items.

8. The method of Claim 1, wherein the contact information includes an email alias for permitting anonymous communications.

9. The method of Claim 1, further comprising presenting to users of the store at least one option screen which permits users to authorize release of contact information to other users on at least one of (a) a user-by-user basis, and (b) a community-by-community basis.

10. The method of Claim 1, wherein the community is an implicit membership community.

11. The method of Claim 10, wherein the implicit membership community is based on email addresses of users.

12. The method of Claim 1, wherein electronically notifying the first user of the contact information comprises presenting the first user an option to chat online with the second user.

13. A system for assisting users of an online store in evaluating items of an electronic catalog of items, the system comprising:

a data structure which maps items from the catalog to users that have purchased such items; and

a process which responds to an online request by a first user to view a description of an item from the catalog by at least (a) accessing the data structure to identify a second user that has purchased the item, and (b) displaying contact information of the second user to the first user in conjunction with the description.

14. The system of Claim 13, wherein the data structure maps items to users that purchased the items for each of a plurality of communities, and the process uses the data structure to locate a fellow community member that purchased the item.

15. The system of Claim 13, wherein the data structure contains the contact information of users.

16. The system of Claim 13, wherein the contact information includes email aliases for at least some of the users.

17. The system of Claim 13, wherein the contact information includes an option for the first user to chat online with the second user.

18. A method of assisting a first user in evaluating a merchant, comprising:  
identifying a community of which the first is a member;  
identifying a second user that is a member of the community and that has engaged in business with the merchant; and  
electronically notifying the first user of the contact information of the second user to allow the first user to communicate with the second user about the merchant.

19. The method of Claim 18, wherein the community is an implicit membership community.

20. The method of Claim 18, wherein the implicit membership community is based on email addresses of users.

21. The method of Claim 18, wherein electronically notifying comprises accessing a data structure which maps merchants to users that have engaged in business with such merchants for each of a plurality of communities.

22. The method of Claim 18, wherein the contact information includes an email alias for permitting anonymous communications.

23. The method of Claim 18, wherein the merchant is a seller on an online auction Web site, and the first user is electronically notified of the second user in response to an action performed by the first user while browsing the Web site.

24. The method of Claim 18, wherein electronically notifying the first user comprises presenting the first user an option to chat online with the second user.